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ABSTRACT

Aboriginal people are not benefiting from the British Columbia school system, as evidenced by their poor performance on basic skills tests, overrepresentation in special education, and low high school completion rates. The British Columbia Human Rights Commission feels that Aboriginal students do not receive an equal education. Through research, public hearings, and follow-up actions, the Commission will identify ways to use its human rights mandate and legislative authority to remove barriers for Aboriginal students in the school system. The intention of the public hearings is to work cooperatively with all education stakeholders to identify and implement solutions to ensure educational equality for Aboriginal students. Educational equity will be achieved when Aboriginal children see themselves and their people reflected in the curriculum, feel a sense of belonging in the school system, and no longer face discrimination; Aboriginal parents are a part of their children's education; Aboriginal communities share control over their children's education; a holistic approach to education is adopted; and non-Aboriginal Canadians understand their country's history regarding Aboriginal people and respect the unique status of Aboriginal people. Key questions for public hearings include: How can the Commission work with education and Aboriginal communities to create an equal education system for Aboriginal students? How can identified barriers be eliminated? What educational barriers have yet to be identified? and Which programs and activities are successful? (Contains 28 endnotes.) (TD)

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Pathways to Equality:

Hearings on Access to Public Education for Aboriginal People

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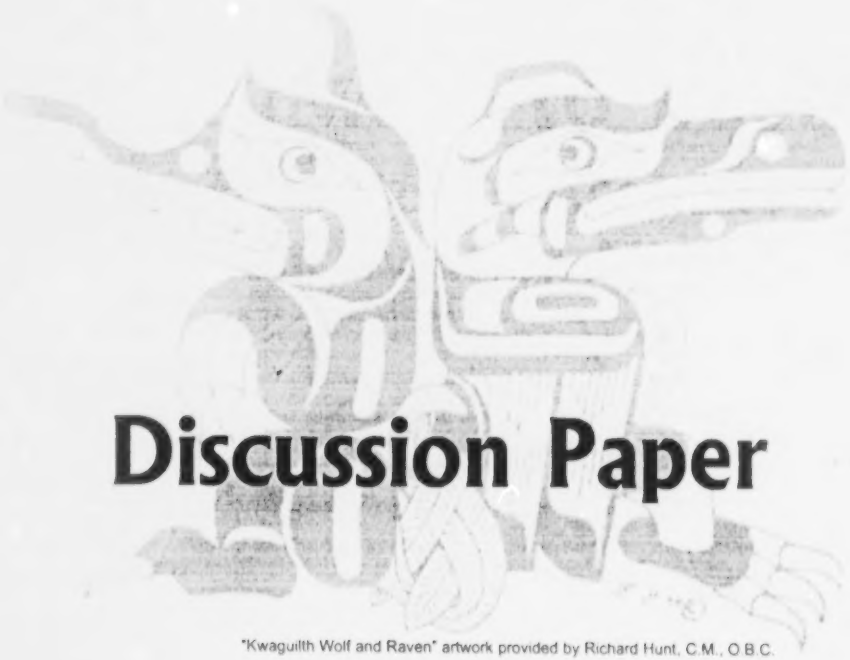

"Kwaguilth Wolf and Raven" artwork provided by Richard Hunt, C.M., O.B.C.

Discussion Paper

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British Columbia Human Rights Commission, 2001

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Kwaguilth Wolf and Raven

The Wolf symbolizes cunning and is revered because it is a good hunter, and is often associated with a special spirit a man had to become to be a successful hunter. The Wolf is one of the main crests of Richard's mother, Helen Hunt and his sister's dances from Kingcome, B.C. The Raven is the trickster, and is the main crest of the Hunt family from Fort Rupert, B.C. The Wolf's and the Raven's tail are intertwined to show unity.

About the Artist

Richard Hunt was born in Alert Bay in 1951 and comes from a family of internationally respected artists, including his late father Henry Hunt and his grandfather Mungo Martin. His work comprises a diverse body of artworks, including limited editions serigraphs, painted boxes, drums, and screens, jewellery, and Aboriginal ceremonial items such as masks, frontlets, rattles, and bowls. Richard's monumental works include totem poles, grave markers, houseposts, and a full size Nuu-chah-nulth (Nootka) whaling Canoe. Richard Hunt's native name is Gwe-la-yo-gwe-la-gya-les and means, "a man that travels around the world giving."

Introduction

The BC Human Rights Commission (BCHRC) believes that Aboriginal children and youth in our province face barriers to an equal education. The Commission is committed to addressing this issue and to developing a society that respects and includes all people.

In October and November 2001, the Commission will hold eight public hearings throughout the province. These hearings will explore the subject of equality for Aboriginal students in the province's public schools.

The Commission invites everyone concerned about education, equality and the rights of Aboriginal students to explore the issues and develop solutions. We at the Commission hope to hear from Aboriginal youth, both in and out of school, Aboriginal parents, educators, community organizations, and other concerned students and citizens.

This discussion paper explains why the Commission believes that Aboriginal students do not receive an equal education. It also explains the Commission's understanding of the causes of this problem. The Commission hopes that this paper will provide information that will help you to participate in the public hearings. The paper, based on research and consultation, contains the following six sections:

1. Equal Education Is a Human Right
2. The BC Human Rights Commission: Why we're concerned
3. Aboriginal Education: Then and Now
4. Education Equity: Removing the Barriers
5. Questions for Hearings
6. Endnotes

After the public hearings, the Commission will prepare a final report. This report will include recommendations and an action plan to improve the situation for Aboriginal students in the province's public schools. The Government of British Columbia, representatives of Aboriginal communities, and groups in the education system will receive copies of this report. This report will also be available to the public.

This discussion paper will rely on the following definitions:

Equality once meant that everyone should be treated the same. However, treating everyone or all groups the same does not always respond to their needs or lead to equal access and opportunity. Treating everyone the same ignores diversity and special needs, such as different cultural backgrounds and physical abilities. Sometimes, to achieve equality and to meet the needs of different groups, we have to treat people differently.

Discrimination happens when you are denied the chance to participate fully in your workplace, to receive public services and to find a place to live because of things like your age, sex, race, colour, ancestry, or disability. Examples of discrimination include being harassed at work because you are Aboriginal, being refused accommodation for your physical disability, and being denied an apartment because you are a single parent.

Systemic Discrimination is built into our usual ways of working and living. Over time, we have developed practices, behaviours, and beliefs that exclude certain groups. Our workplaces, schools, and services have policies and practices that appear to treat everyone the same, but that limit the participation of certain people. For example, rules that said that police officers had to be a certain height prevented most women, and men from certain ethnic groups, from joining the police. Systemic discrimination also includes stereotypes and prejudices about certain groups of people that are widely held, and affect the way entire organizations or systems work. The result of systemic discrimination is that certain groups are excluded from opportunities and benefits for reasons that have nothing to do with their abilities and interests.

Racism is a type of discrimination. Like other types of discrimination it can be intentional or not. Racism happens when you are treated differently, excluded, harassed, or discriminated against because of your race, colour, ancestry, or place of origin.

Dogwood Completion Rate (tracking-based), or "Completion Rate"
The proportion of students who graduate with a Dogwood Diploma within six years of starting Grade 8 for the first time in a BC public or independents school. It includes migrants to BC who would have been in Grade 8 in the base year, and is adjusted for out-migration from BC. This rate, which uses Personal Education Numbers to track students, is used in 1996/97 and subsequent years.

Equal Education Is a Human Right

> *For more than 25 years, Aboriginal people have been articulating their goals for Aboriginal education. ... education to prepare them to participate fully in the economic life of their communities and in Canadian society ... education must develop children and youth as Aboriginal citizens, linguistically and culturally competent to assume the responsibilities of their nations ... Consistent with Aboriginal traditions, education must develop the whole child, intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, and physically.*
>
> *Current education policies fail to realize these goals. The majority of Aboriginal youth do not complete high school. ... Those who continue in Canada's formal education systems told us of regular encounters with racism, racism expressed not only in interpersonal exchanges but also through the denial of Aboriginal values, perspectives and cultures in the curriculum and the life of the institution.*[1]

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights says that "everyone has the right to education ... Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights...."[2]

After the Declaration, Canada signed international treaties committed to making education available to all children. Canada committed to using education to strengthen understanding among different groups and to end discrimination. Canadians agree that education must develop the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential. We also agree that education should develop respect for the child's cultural identity, language, and values as well as for our national values.[3]

The *Canadian Constitution* and the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* describe Canada's national values and the obligations of Canadians to one another. The Charter guarantees equality to all Canadians regardless of race, ethnic origin, colour, sex, or other personal characteristics. Section 35 of our Constitution also recognizes that Aboriginal peoples in Canada have special status as the first peoples and nations of this land. This status is not more or less important than other rights guaranteed to all

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Canadians, but it is special because it is specific to Aboriginal members of our community.

In British Columbia, the *Human Rights Code* protects the right to equal access to education. The Code also directs the Human Rights Commission to identify and eliminate discrimination and to promote a society with no barriers to full and free participation in the economic, social, political and cultural life of the province.

The *School Act* governs education in British Columbia. This law says that the purpose of the school system is to encourage all students to develop to their individual potential and to build a "healthy, democratic and pluralistic society." [4]

Court decisions explain how our rights should be respected in our daily lives. A recent Supreme Court of Canada decision, commonly called the Meiorin decision, said that it is not enough to continue doing business as usual, and make concessions to include people or groups who do not fit into our regular practice. Instead, the Court said that we need to transform our institutions and our practices so that they are "accessible, meaningful and rewarding for the many diverse groups of which our society is composed."[5] This decision suggests that if an entire group of people is not benefiting from our school system, then it is our responsibility to transform that system.

These legal commitments make it clear that our obligation in this province is to provide an effective education for all children, and to work to end discrimination in education and in our communities.

But what is the reality for Aboriginal students?

The Commission has heard from Aboriginal organizations concerned that Aboriginal students are not succeeding in the education system.

Educators share these concerns. For example, recent Ministry of Education statistics[6] on provincial tests of writing, reading and math skills show how Aboriginal students do in these basic skills compared to their non-Aboriginal classmates:

- As early as grade 4, Aboriginal students lag behind their non-Aboriginal classmates. Aboriginal children pass the tests at a range of 61% - 71%, compared to non-Aboriginal children who pass the tests at a range of 83% - 88%.
- By grade 10, the gap widens. Only 55%-65% of Aboriginal students pass the tests, compared to 77%-85% of non-Aboriginal students.

Aboriginal students make up 7% of the student population in British Columbia, but they make up 19.2% of the students in special education categories (not including Gifted). Aboriginal students represent less than 1% of students in the gifted category.

These early disadvantages are reflected in the rates at which Aboriginal students complete high school compared to their non-Aboriginal classmates. The statistics from the Ministry of Education show that:

- In BC, 38% of Aboriginal students completed from grade 12, while 77% of non-Aboriginal students completed in the same time period.
- Completion rates vary from one school district to another. In 1999 they varied from 5% in Stikine to 66% in Richmond.

Completion rates are only one sign of the quality of education that Aboriginal youth receive. Completion rates do not show what students experience at school, whether students graduate with the courses needed for college or university, or to pursue other interests. They don't show if school prepares students for work or life.

The BC Human Rights Commission: Why We're Concerned

The Commission's mandate, based on *BC Human Rights Code*, is to ensure equality for all British Columbians. The Commission is concerned that Aboriginal students do not receive equal access to education. In its Strategic Plan for 1998 to 2003 the Commission commits to addressing this lack of education access:

> By 2003, we will, through community partnerships and our legislated authority, achieve significant breakthroughs in removing barriers to full participation in society. Specifically, we will reduce barriers in K-12 education for Aboriginal people, by improving their rate of successful completion of grades 8, 10, and 12 to match the provincial average.

To ensure equality for all British Columbians, the *BC Human Rights Code* prohibits discrimination in employment, public services, and tenancy, based on:

- race, colour, ancestry, and place of origin
- family status and marital status
- physical and mental disability
- political belief
- religion
- age (19-65)
- sex (including sexual harassment, pregnancy, breastfeeding, and gender identity)
- sexual orientation
- criminal or summary conviction that is unrelated to employment.

To address discrimination, the Commission can:

- conduct research and hold public hearings discrimination
- investigate and mediate complaints of discrimination filed by individuals and organizations
- file a human rights complaint
- present special reports to the BC Legislature on human rights issues
- provide advice on and approve employment equity and special programs that are meant to improve the situation of disadvantaged groups in British Columbia.

The Code gives the BC Human Rights Commission the authority to address discrimination in all provincial organizations, including the province's public school system.

Through research, public hearings and follow-up actions, the Commission will identify ways to use its human rights mandate and legislative authority to contribute to efforts to remove barriers for Aboriginal students in the school system. The intention of these hearings is to work cooperatively with all education stakeholders, including Aboriginal communities, and to identify and implement solutions to ensure equality for Aboriginal students in the public school system.

These hearings are a first step. The Commission's goals with these hearings and our follow-up action are:

- Equality of education for aboriginal children and youth, including equal access to education, equal quality of learning opportunities and equal outcomes.
- An education system that promotes a society of mutual understanding and respect, that recognizes the Aboriginal rights embedded in the Canadian Constitution and that promotes the dignity of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal Education: Then and Now

To understand the current experiences of Aboriginal students in public schools, and to remove barriers to equality in education, it's important to understand the history of Canada's relationship with Aboriginal peoples.

> *In this respect, the past is more than something to be recalled and debated intellectually. It has important contemporary and practical implications, because many of the attitudes, institutions and practices that took shape in the past significantly influence and constrain the present. This is most obvious when it comes to laws such as the Indian Act, but it is also evident in many of the assumptions that influence how contemporary institutions such as the educational, social services and justice systems function.*[7]

Before the arrival of settlers, Aboriginal Nations lived in the territory now known as Canada. These Nations were self-governing. They had well-developed cultures, their own languages, complex economies and trading practices. In most Nations, elders, parents, aunts and uncles shared responsibility for teaching the members of their nations. Children learned about the land, relationships (human relations, intra- and inter-nation relations), living in harmony with their natural environment, and their history, language and spiritual beliefs. They learned about their traditions through music and art. All community members learned to contribute to the community's well-being.

After their arrival, European settlers developed treaties with the First Nations. Britain's King George III declared the need for treaties in the Royal Proclamation of 1763. This Proclamation remains part of the Canadian Constitution. As Chief Harold Turner of the Swampy Cree Tribal Council told the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples: "Europeans recognized that we were nations and made Treaties with the First Nations peoples on a nation-to-nation basis."

By the mid 1800's, the relationship between the settlers and the First Nations changed. A bigger non-Aboriginal population, and a shift from fur trading to resource exploitation meant that traditional Aboriginal use and title to the land conflicted with the settlers' economic goals. This period saw the end of most aspects of the earlier nation-to-nation relationship. The "negotiation of treaties continued, but side by side with legislated dispossession, through the Indian Act. Aboriginal peoples lost control

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and management of their own lands and resources, and their traditional customs and forms of organization were interfered with in the interest of remaking Aboriginal people in the image of the newcomers."[8]

To assimilate Aboriginal people, the Churches and the Canadian government set up residential schools. For over one hundred years, Aboriginal children were removed from the care of their parents and grandparents and placed in these schools. These children were beaten for speaking their own language, and Aboriginal beliefs were labelled "pagan." In many schools, sisters and brothers were forbidden to see each other, and cruel child rearing and hard labour replaced the warmth of the intergenerational Aboriginal family. Many children suffered psychological, emotional, sexual, and physical abuse.

Most residential schools closed by the mid-1970s, with only seven remaining open in the 1980s. The last federally-run residential school in Canada closed in 1986.

The lasting impact of residential schools and other assimilation policies can be seen in the barriers to equality and full participation in Canadian society faced by Aboriginal people. "Of all groups, Aboriginal peoples are the most disadvantaged in education, employment, and income. ...even when Aboriginal peoples and foreign-born minorities have a university education, they are still less likely than non-racialized groups to have incomes in the top 20% of the income scale."[9]

> *Although residential schools have disappeared from the Canadian educational landscape ... their legacy endures. ... The self-fulfilling prophecy inherent in racism came to fruition as Aboriginal peoples deemed to be inferior were schooled for inequality and thereby largely did end up in the bottom ranks of Canadian society.*[10]

The legacy of residential schools is still evident in the current relationship of Aboriginal communities, parents, and youth to the public school system. For example:

- Aboriginal students have few Aboriginal role models in the schools.
- In spite of changes in the curriculum, the school curriculum continues to reflect a European world-view. Specifically, First Nations history and culture is often minimalized, is inaccurate, or simply ignored.

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- Aboriginal issues and knowledges are treated as add-ons to the curriculum rather than integral components.
- The school culture does not meet the needs of Aboriginal children.
- Many parents and grandparents who attended residential schools distrust public school education for their children because of their negative experiences in residential schools.
- Many parents report feeling isolated from the school system, and excluded from decisions about their children's education.

Research suggests that racism, and a lack of support in the schools contribute to Aboriginal students' high drop-out rate, or what Viola Thomas, former President of the United Native Nations calls the "push-out rate". Here's what Aboriginal youth are saying about their education today:

- "I was placed in what you'd call a "special classroom" in elementary school, just being labeled native. I'm not really a slow person."[11]
- "Instead of having special classes for First Nations studies, just change the textbooks because none of the textbooks are correct."[12]
- "A lot of teachers are condescending. They make us feel uncomfortable. They embarrass us."[13]
- "I'll tell you why I'm not in school. I thought I was going to graduate and then in the last semester, the counsellor told me I was 4 credits short."[14]
- "Schools must include programs against racism in curricula at all levels. Schools must provide opportunities for all students to learn about the values and beliefs of other people. The stuff of Native culture, for example, should be compulsory for non-Aboriginal students also."[15]
- "You can get the education, but who's going to hire (a native)?"[16]

> *Education can be a weapon or a tool. In the past, it was used as a weapon that separated families and communities, and almost destroyed First Nations cultures and languages. Today, Aboriginal communities want to use education as a tool to rebuild their nations, to strengthen their culture and language.*
>
> *Chief Ron Ignace, Skeetchestn Indian Band, Shuswap Nation.*

Education is a fundamental human right of all people, but for the Aboriginal community it is a critical step to overcoming historical disadvantages. In addition, Aboriginal communities are more seriously affected by a lack of access to education than most other communities. Forty-five percent of the Aboriginal population are under the age of 24. Ninety percent of Aboriginal children are in the public school system in B.C. What happens in public schools will have a big impact on the future of Aboriginal communities.

The Commission agrees that education can be a tool for building a community of respect and understanding, a community in which all human rights, including the unique rights of Aboriginal peoples, are valued and respected.

Education Equity: Removing the Barriers

The Commission believes that ***education equity*** can ensure the continued survival of Aboriginal cultures. Through education equity future Aboriginal leaders can continue the work of re-building and maintaining their nations and their cultures. Education equity will be achieved when:

- Aboriginal children and youth see themselves reflected in the curriculum,
- Aboriginal children and youth feel a sense of place and belonging in the school system
- Aboriginal children and youth see their people represented in the school system,
- Aboriginal parents are a vital part of their children's education,
- Aboriginal communities share control over the education of their children,
- Aboriginal children and youth no longer face discrimination or harassment on a daily basis
- and, non-Aboriginal Canadians understand their country's history regarding Aboriginal people and respect the unique status of Aboriginal people.

The information in this section is drawn from the research document, "Barriers to Equal Education for Aboriginal Learners: A Review of the Literature." For a copy of this research, visit our website at: www.bchumanrights.org, or contact our office at:

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Research conducted by the Commission shows that Aboriginal communities and educators have identified key barriers to education equity over the past 30 years. In recent years, educators and Aboriginal leaders in B.C. worked together to understand these barriers and eliminate them. However more work needs to be done to achieve education equity for Aboriginal students. The purpose of the following summary of key barriers to education equity is to generate discussion and creative solutions. In addition, the Commission hopes to identify barriers not already identified by the research and to develop solutions.

1. Aboriginal control of decision-making in the education of their children

Local communities and parents need to influence their children's education. This fundamental responsibility is recognized in international treaties and the *B.C. School Act*. It is also reflected in the structure of Canada's school system. Elected school boards are the main way that communities exercise control over education. But parent advisory councils can also play an important role.

In 1972, the National Indian Brotherhood released a policy paper, "Indian Control over Indian Education." This paper recognizes the principles of "local control" and "parental responsibility," and it advocates for Aboriginal peoples to take control of their children's education. Researchers and organizers have called for Aboriginal control over Aboriginal education for 30 years, emphasizing that this control is essential to Aboriginal rights and First Nations' ability to thrive.

Although there have been some positive changes over the last 30 years, Aboriginal communities still have little influence over their children's education. Research identifies several barriers limiting Aboriginal control over public school education.

The public education system divides power and responsibility among many different people and groups. Key players include the BC Ministry of Education, the BC College of Teachers, school boards, district superintendents, principals, vice-principals, teachers, support staff, parents, students, and the community. The federal Department of Indian and Northern Affairs also influences Aboriginal education. These officials and groups make decisions about various aspects of education, such as curriculum, teacher training and certification, school culture, and student support services. Some of their responsibilities are spelled out in legislation or in written agreements. Other less obvious divisions of authority have emerged over time.

Aboriginal people are mostly excluded from this authority network. They are under-represented in every education system role. Many existing methods for involving parents and community members--developed for the non-Aboriginal community--do not work for Aboriginal parents and communities. The education system's complexity makes it very difficult for those outside the system to provide meaningful input.

Local Education Committees, First Nations Education Co-ordinators, and Aboriginal Support Workers provide support for Aboriginal involvement in Aboriginal education. However, these groups and individuals can influence only programs intended specifically for Aboriginal students. They have limited influence on the school system structure or the core education of Aboriginal students.

Another issue in Aboriginal education relates to accountability and control over Aboriginal education funding. The federal government gives the provincial government funds to cover the tuition fees of Aboriginal children who live on reserve. The province also provides additional education funds directly to Aboriginal students and their schools. However, research and consultation has raised concerns that Aboriginal communities sometimes have limited power over this funding. The funding is not always used appropriately and effectively, and school districts are not held accountable for their decisions.

Discussion Questions:

How can Aboriginal parents and communities exercise more control in the public school system?

How can existing methods of local control and input be used to facilitate the involvement of Aboriginal parents and communities?

Imagine a school system that incorporated Aboriginal peoples as full partners in the education of their children. What would that system look like?

2. Aboriginal parents - left out of decisions about their children's education

Research reveals Aboriginal parents have been, and continue to be, marginalized in the public education system. Many education researchers argue that Aboriginal parents must play a major role in the education of their children. Yet Aboriginal parents are generally excluded from the decision-making process. This exclusion contradicts the role that Aboriginal parents have traditionally played in their children's education.

> *We say that parents must play a major role in the education of their children, yet in many communities parents have no idea what is going on in school. They are rarely invited to meetings to decide on directions to be taken. They are rarely asked for their original thoughts on how or what should be done in certain situations. School board meetings are often closed meetings.* [17]

The school system invites parents of school-aged children to play a role in their children's education. For example, parents can attend parent/teacher conferences, become involved in parent advisory committees, and provide input to the Board of School Trustees.

However, research shows that these methods exclude Aboriginal parents. Parents who deal with school systems successfully are those who understand the institutional language and protocols of schools.[19] To do this requires a high level of education and familiarity with the key players in the school system - barriers to many parents, including Aboriginal parents. In addition Aboriginal parents may feel isolated as a result of the legacy of residential schools and other tools of assimilation.

Discussion Questions for Aboriginal Parents:

- How would you describe your relationship to the school system?
- What are the strengths and barriers that you see in the public school system?
- Do you feel you have all of the information you need to participate in decisions about your child's education?
- How do you see yourself and the school system working together to provide the best education for your children?

3. Aboriginal youth - the missing voices

Aboriginal children and youth are a critical part of the public education system. Despite the vast amount of research, and the groups working to improve the situation, the drop-out rates for Aboriginal students remain high. An important step forward is to involve Aboriginal youth in the development of programs and curriculum.

> *Parents are not the only ones who feel unable to shape the education process significantly. Youth themselves are excluded. ... although their present and future are at stake, they are rarely involved in decisions about their education. ... This sense of disempowerment signals that the experience of youth is out of alignment with statements by Aboriginal leaders who place hope and trust in youth as the next generation of leaders.*[19]

Tonya Makletzoff of Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, expressed her opinion on the problem in her submission to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples:

> A lot of things that have been put in place for youth don't work because they haven't consulted youth themselves. It is time for us to start doing things as young people because no one is going to do it for us. We can't wait for the government or the community to do things. We have to work with them.

Discussion Questions for Aboriginal Youth:

Do you feel that school is preparing you for your future?

Do you feel that you are provided information to make decisions about your education?

If not, what information would you like? How can this information be provided to you?

Do you feel safe at school? Have you experienced racism or bullying? What does a safe school environment look like to you?

In what ways can Aboriginal youth be involved in shaping programs and classroom subjects?

4. Aboriginal teachers, administrators, and support staff - few role-models for students

The reality in our school system today is that many Aboriginal children and youth spend most of their time in the classroom with non-Aboriginal educators. Employment equity targeted at increasing the number of Aboriginal teachers and support staff is one way to address this under-representation.

Research shows that employment equity for Aboriginal teachers and support staff:

- is crucial to inclusive education and power-sharing,
- can provide role models for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students,
- can enhance education about Aboriginal history and culture for all students,
- can provide cultural resources for the school, and
- can validate and promote difference among students.

Employment equity should also address racist attitudes towards Aboriginal staff and how they are placed in the school. The Commission has heard from Aboriginal educators about racism from their colleagues; the resistance to their recommendations for changes to improve education for Aboriginal students; the refusal to spend appropriately funds targeted for Aboriginal education; and, their exclusion from decision-making processes.

Discussion Questions:

As an Aboriginal educator, have you experienced any barriers and successes within the school system? If so, what were they? If you've identified barriers, what are ways that these can be removed?

In what ways can employment equity plans contribute to increasing the representation of, and enhance the employment experience of Aboriginal educators and support staff in schools?

What other suggestions do you have for increasing the visibility and working conditions of Aboriginal educators and support staff?

5. Curriculum - exclusion of Aboriginal knowledges and languages

> *When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing.*[20]

The Commission agrees that curriculum is more than course selection, content, and delivery. In addition, students learn from their school environment which includes:

- seating plan
- group work
- posters and music
- interactions between students, and staff and students
- choices of plays and celebrations
- announcements, prayers
- languages spoken in the school

- food served in the cafeteria
- visitors to the classrooms
- reception of parents in the office
- races (or race) of all school staff
- school teams and sports played
- clubs, school logo, field trips
- facial expressions and body language of everybody, the clothes everybody wears.[21]

A school's culture, made up of all of these elements, has a profound impact on students' self-image, on their view of world and their place in that world. It's clear that a school's physical and visual environment shapes learning as much as the information in textbooks. Educators, students, and the community all share in the responsibility to shape a school's environment.

The Commission's research shows that the current curriculum presents several barriers to Aboriginal students.

First, curriculum content fails to reflect and reinforce the fact that the Aboriginal people are distinct, self-determining and self-governing. They are a people who are working to regain control over institutions that affect them.[22]

In addition, the curriculum does not accurately portray Canada's history with respect to Aboriginal people. Specifically, research shows that school curriculum in much of Canada is based on the assumption of European superiority. This assumption influences the selection of content that is exposed to our children.[23] For example, the presentation of "two founding nations" in Canada's history denies the important contributions of the First Nations to Canada's historical development.

Finally, the lack of a holistic approach to education is another barrier for Aboriginal students.

Holistic education is used to describe the kind of education traditionally used by Aboriginal peoples. With holistic education, the student is seen as a whole person with intellectual, spiritual, emotional and physical dimensions. Education is organized to develop each of these dimensions. In western countries, education focuses on intellectual development. The focus intensifies as the student moves into higher levels of education.[24]

To validate and support the experiences and cultural identity of Aboriginal youth will require that we:

- acknowledge Canada's historic relationship with the First Nations
- acknowledge Aboriginal people as a unique and self-determining people with unique rights, and
- incorporate a holistic approach to education.

Failing to accomplish these goals will perpetuate racism towards Aboriginal students and all Aboriginal people.

Discussion Questions:

What are the consequences to students, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, of a curriculum that does not acknowledge Aboriginal peoples' contributions to and relationship with Canada?

What is the role of the Ministry of Education, School Districts and education partners, in providing an accurate portrayal of our history?

How can the Ministry, school districts and Aboriginal communities work together to incorporate Aboriginal languages, Aboriginal art, literature, math and science into the curriculum? Are there school districts or communities that have achieved this? If so, what can we learn from them?

How can the Ministry, school districts and Aboriginal communities work together to incorporate a holistic approach to educating Aboriginal children?

6. Lack of cultural competency of staff and students in the public school system

Many Aboriginal youth report experiencing racism at school, by both teachers and students. This racism is either direct, or takes the form of not objecting to racist actions.

> *A teacher that had a really bad temper used to scare me. If you made a mistake he would lose his temper and yell at me. I swear [he] was racist. He wouldn't help the native kids, and if we got angry about not getting help, he'd send us out in the hall.*[25]

Schools are an ideal place for anti-discrimination and human rights education, both in the curriculum and in day-to-day interactions. School relationships, teachers with students and parents, and students with students, provide opportunities for education on diversity, cultural inclusiveness, and the human rights principles of equality, respect and dignity for all. Teacher training is key to promoting a school culture based on human rights principles.

> *Teacher Training does little to prepare teachers to know how to create collaborative classrooms, co-operative relationships, and build critical pedagogy within the classroom.*[26]

To remove barriers for Aboriginal students, it's important to examine teacher training and consider including:

- training to unlearn racism
- training to recognize racism and effectively deal with it
- understanding of Aboriginal cultures and traditions
- training on teaching methods that include all students, and that create a safe and respectful learning environment
- human rights education including the concepts of discrimination, systemic discrimination, and equality.

Discussion Questions:

What is the role of schools in eliminating racism and discrimination? How can schools carry out this role?

What kind of training would enable teachers to help students address racism? What would help students?

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7. Socio-economic barriers

Research suggests the immediate need for the education system to address the unfavourable learning environments caused by many Aboriginal people's adverse socio-economic conditions. Aboriginal people are the most economically disadvantaged group in Canadian society.

> *Unless the health, social, and economic conditions of Native lives are generally improved, the problems of language development and lower-than-average educational attainment levels will regrettably remain a part of the Native experience at schools.*[27]

The education system cannot directly alleviate poverty among Aboriginal families, but it can develop strategies in partnership with Aboriginal communities to support successful learning for Aboriginal students affected by poverty.

Discussion Question:

What are ways in which the education system can work with Aboriginal communities in supporting learning and success for Aboriginal students living in poverty?

8. Aboriginal students in special education classes - too many are labelled

> *Another problem area is that we tend with First Nations students to label them immediately with preconceptions. We say there will be problems, that they won't be academic students. We categorize and judge them too early. ... Kids know about these expectations. We need high expectations - we need to tell them we know they can do well, we believe in them.*[28]

Aboriginal students are disproportionately represented in all Special Education categories with the exception of the Gifted category. Aboriginal students are significantly under-represented in the Gifted category.

Research has highlighted some concerns about the methods of assessing Aboriginal students. These concerns include the following:

- assumptions about Aboriginal children that can lead to inappropriate labelling
- assessment tools need to be adapted to be effective for Aboriginal children
- the exclusion of the Aboriginal parenting community from the assessment process.

Aboriginal students placed in the special education category, find it very difficult to get out. In addition, parents unfamiliar with institutional language may consent to placing their children in such categories without a full understanding of the long-term implications.

Finally, research suggests that there is a lack of funding to support the large number of Aboriginal students categorized under 'behaviour', 'other special education', or 'severe learning disability'.

Discussion Questions:

In what ways can Aboriginal parents be involved in decisions about categorizing their children?

What can be done to examine assessment processes for cultural appropriateness? Who should be involved in this process?

How can the process of assessing children be improved?

Questions for Hearings

To achieve education equity in the provincial public school system, we must work together to remove barriers that prevent Aboriginal students from succeeding. We must also create an education system that enables Aboriginal children to develop their potential and acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to contribute to a healthy society and to rebuild and maintain their nations and cultures.

The Commission invites you to participate in these public hearings. Bring your knowledge, experience, and ideas for removing barriers to Aboriginal students' success and for making the education system equal for all students.

Key Questions:

1) How can the Commission, within its legislated authority, work with the education and Aboriginal communities to create an equal education system for Aboriginal students?

2) What are your recommendations for eliminating the barriers that have been identified?

3) Are there any barriers that have not been identified? If so, what are they? What are your recommendations to remove these barriers?

4) Are there programs and activities that are working well? If so, what are they?

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Endnotes

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[15] *Gathering Strength*. Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, Volume 1. [on-line] <http://www.indigenous.bc.ca/rcap.htm> Dawn Campbell, North Battleford High School, speaking before the Royal Commission

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